

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
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VOTING RIGHTS: UPDATE ON MULTILINGUAL ELECTIONS

ANNCR:

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SAYS THAT NEW CENSUS DATA SHOW THAT THIRTY OF THE FIFTY AMERICAN STATES WILL HAVE TO PRINT ELECTION BALLOTS IN AT LEAST TWO LANGUAGES. THE MULTILINGUAL ELECTIONS ARE REQUIRED IN AREAS THAT HAVE SUBSTANTIAL LANGUAGE MINORITIES UNDER A RECENT AMENDMENT TO THIS COUNTRY'S VOTING RIGHTS LAW. CHRIS KERN HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT ON THIS LATEST EFFORT TO ENLARGE THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE.

VOICE:

THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE VOTING RIGHTS LAW IS THE LATEST IN A SERIES OF MEASURES THAT HAS EXPANDED THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE FROM A HISTORICALLY TINY ELITE TO VIRTUALLY EVERY CITIZEN OVER EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD.

TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, WHEN THE UNITED STATES DECLARED ITS INDEPENDENCE FROM GREAT BRITAIN, MOST AMERICAN STATES RESTRICTED THE VOTE TO WHITE MALE PROPERTY OWNERS. THE PROPERTY-OWNING REQUIREMENTS WERE RELAXED WITH THE GROWTH OF AN INCREASINGLY DOMINANT WORKING CLASS, BUT THE REQUIREMENT THAT VOTERS BE WHITE AND MALE SURVIVED ESSENTIALLY INTACT FOR ALMOST A HUNDRED YEARS. THEN, BEGINNING IN 1870, THE BARRIERS BEGAN TO FALL.

BLACK MALES GOT THE VOTE THAT YEAR BY CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT AFTER A LONG AND BLOODY CIVIL WAR BETWEEN THE INDUSTRIAL NORTHERN STATES AND THE AGRICULTURAL, SLAVE-OWNING SOUTH. THEN CAME THE WOMEN IN 1920, AGAIN BY CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT, CULMINATING AN EFFORT TO GRANT FEMALE SUFFRAGE THAT WAS ALMOST AS OLD AS THE REPUBLIC.

STILL ANOTHER CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT -- THIS ONE IN 1960 -- GAVE THE VOTE TO RESIDENTS OF WASHINGTON, WHO HAD BEEN KEPT OUT OF THE ELECTORATE BY AN IRONY OF HISTORY: THE NATIONAL CAPITAL WAS A FEDERAL DISTRICT, NOT A STATE, AND THEREFORE FAILED TO MEET THE CONSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENT FOR POLITICAL REPRESENTATION. POOR PEOPLE WERE GUARANTEED THE RIGHT TO VOTE BY A 1964 AMENDMENT WHICH SAID THAT SUFFRAGE COULD NOT BE DENIED FOR FAILURE TO PAY POLL TAXES. AND IN 1971, A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT LOWERED THE VOTING AGE FROM TWENTY-ONE TO EIGHTEEN -- THE AGE OF MILITARY CONSCRIPTION -- ENDING THE ANOMOLY OF SENDING CITIZENS OFF TO WAR BEFORE THEY WERE ALLOWED TO VOTE.

IN THE MEANTIME, THE U.S. CONGRESS WAS ACTING TO GIVE PRACTICAL EFFECT TO THE RIGHTS GUARANTEED BY THE VARIOUS CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS. THE FIRST VOTING RIGHTS LAW, PASSED IN 1965 AT THE CLIMAX OF THE BLACK CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, WAS DESIGNED TO GIVE BLACK VOTERS FEDERAL PROTECTION WHEN THEY EXERCISED THEIR HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD FRANCHISE.

NOW THE LAW HAS BEEN AMENDED TO ENCOURAGE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY AMERICAN INDIANS, ASIAN-AMERICANS, ALASKAN NATIVES AND THOSE WITH SPANISH BACKGROUNDS. THE BIGGEST GROUP AFFECTED BY THE NEW PROVISIONS IS THIS COUNTRY'S LARGE SPANISH-SPEAKING MINORITY, WHICH IS SCATTERED THROUGH THE SOUTHWESTERN STATES AND SOME OF THE LARGE INDUSTRIAL CITIES IN THE NORTHEAST.

AREAS WITH LARGE NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING POPULATIONS HAVE TO PROVIDE BALLOTS PRINTED IN THAT SECOND LANGUAGE AS WELL AS ENGLISH OR SEE THAT TRANSLATORS ARE AVAILABLE AT THE POLLS.

THE NEW REQUIREMENTS AFFECT 513 POLITICAL JURISDICTIONS IN THIRTY OF THE FIFTY STATES.

MOST AMERICANS PROBABLY DON'T THINK OF THIS COUNTRY AS A MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY, BUT IF THE EXPERIENCE OF THE VOTING RIGHTS LAW TO DATE IS ANY INDICATION, THEY ARE LIKELY TO BE HEARING A LOT MORE FROM WASHINGTON ABOUT THE PROBLEMS OF THE LANGUAGE MINORITIES. NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING VOTERS FROM A SIZEABLE PROPORTION OF THE ELECTORATE IN MANY AREAS AND, LIKE THE BLACKS WHO WERE ORIGINALLY COVERED BY THE VOTING LAW, THE POLITICAL STRENGTH OF THE LANGUAGE MINORITIES IS SURE TO HAVE A GROWING IMPACT ON DECISIONS BY THEIR SENATORS AND CONGRESSMEN.

JS/RCS